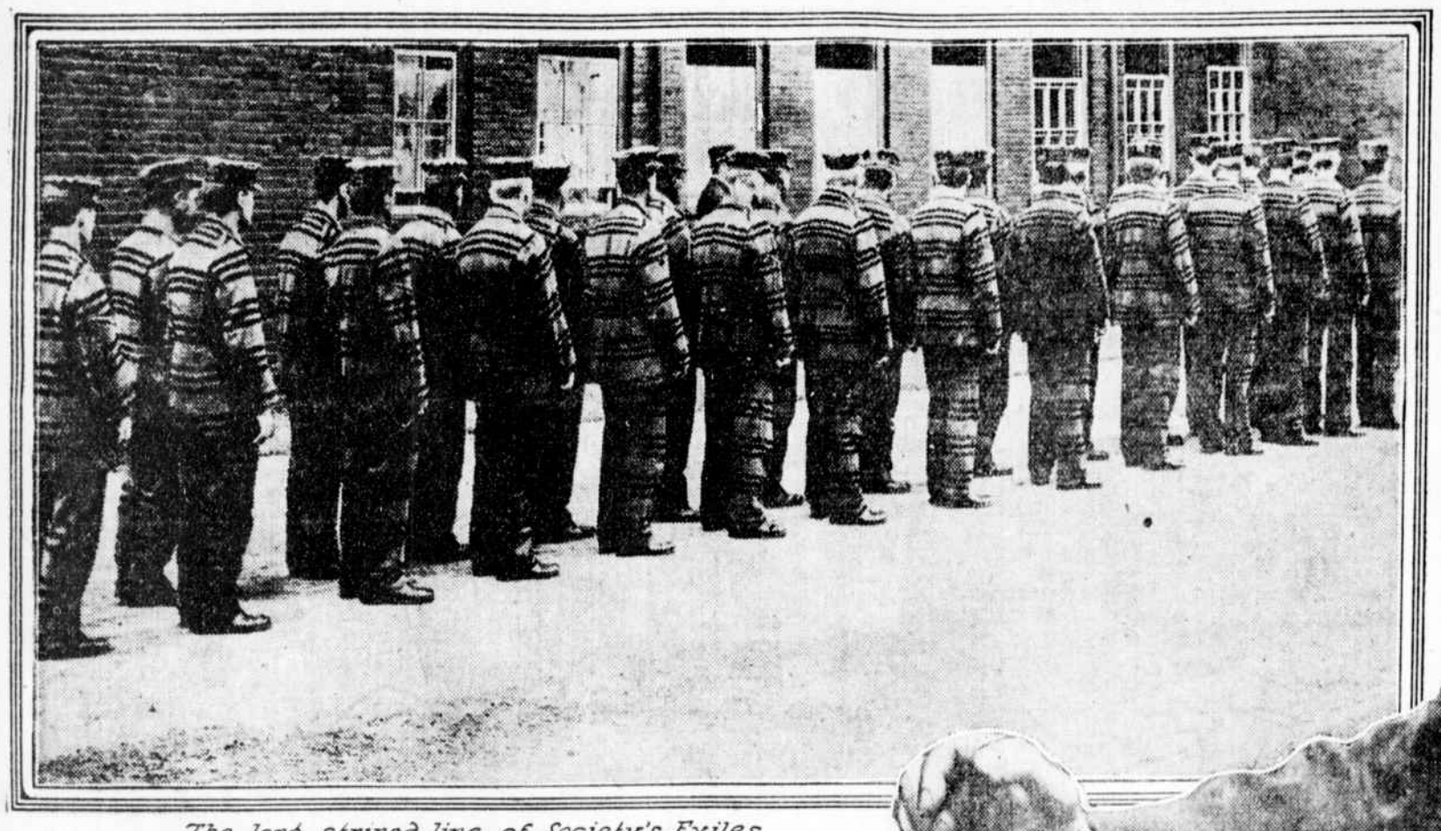
Berkman's Vivid Story of 14-Year Prison Penance for Shooting Frick



The long, striped line of Society's Exiles

Alexander Berkman, Author of remerkable Prison Story, speaking recently in Union Square

With Facile Pen, the Notorious Anarchist Relates in Detail His Experiences in Straitjacket and in "Solitary"; Tells of Futile Plot to Escape and of Prison Scenes; Abuses and Their Remedies.

A STORY of prison life by an author who spent fourteen years behind the bars 'gathering his material ought to have value as a human document. When the writer, furthermore, wields his pen in the manner of the Slavic realists and is compared by critics with such men as Dostoievsky and Andreieff his work must possess a tremendous fascination as well as a social value. Whatever the defects of such an achievement and regardless of any prejudices against the author, its merits must be surpassing.

Alexander Berkman is the prisoner author. His story of five hundred pages was lately got out by the Mother Earth Publishing Association under the title of "Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist." In the preface Hutchins Hapgood advises everybody to read the book, chiefly on the ground that it is a truthful document, that it shows the futility of prisons, that it is a vibrant picture of life and a study of an agonized soul that survived. During the Homestead trouble of 1892 Henry Clay Frick was shot and wounded by Berkman, then a boy twenty-two years old, who thought that militant anarchism was a social panacea. Berkman refused the services of a lawyer and was sentenced to twenty-two years' imprisonment on several charges. With commutation his time in the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania amounted to thirteen years, and he put in another year in the workhouse.

Berkman declares that his book, so far as matters of fact are concerned, is photographically accurate. He sent out many letters from prison, openly and secretly, and accumulated a mass of data which he later turned to good account. Some of his records, wrapped in a package covered with oilskin, were hidden in a sewer pipe for months until they could be smuggled out of prison. It is averred by Berkman and his friends that the book is all his; nobody helped him or collaborated with him. Its astonishing literary quality, its technical command of the English language, is explained by the fact that the author had a very fair education when he went to jail, was even then a student of languages and spent a good part of his fourteen years' imprisonment in reading all the books in the extensive prison library. He devoured Webster's Unabridged Dictionary from cover to cover twice in succession, and read more English classics than any college "grind." Moreover, his studying meant life to him. He studied to save himself from suicide or insanity.

BERKMAN'S NEW PHILOSOPHY.

Berkman was advised that if he would leave out some of his philosophy his book would be a "best seller." He replied that, aside from the question of principle, he set out to tell the whole story of his prison life, including his thoughts and feelings. The reader infers that the author's views were not a little modified by his suffering. There is less rancor and bitterness, more love and sympathy, as the prisoner struggles on through the nightmare of confinement toward freedom. At first he was a hard, fanatical idealist. He becomes a warm, immediate humanitarian, who ministers to the sorrowing souls who are beside him. In his memoirs there are the poignant quality of Dostoievsky's "Ten Years in a Dead House" and the psychological analysis of Leonid Andreieff's story of a long time convict.

Soon after his arrival in the penitentiary at Allegheny Berkman planned to kill himself with a spoon ground to a sharp edge. He was discovered in possession of the spoon and taken to the deputy, Mr. McPane.

"In the rotunda, connecting the north and south cellhouses, the deputy stands at a high desk," writes Berkman. "Angular and bony, with slightly stooped shoulders, his face is a mass of minute wrinkles seamed on yellow parchment. The curved nose overhangs thin, compressed lips. The steely eyes measure me coldly, unfriendly.

"'Who is this?'

"The low, almost feminine, voice sharply accentuates the cadaverlike face and figure. The contrast is startling.

"'A7.'

"'What is the charge, officer?'

"'Two charges, Mr. McPane. Layin' in bed and tryin' sooicide.'

"A smile of satanic satisfaction slowly spreads over the deputy's wizened face. The long, heavy fingers of his right hand work convulsively, as if drumming stiffly on an imaginary board.

"'Yes—h-m, h-m—yes. A7, two charges—h-m, h-m. How did he try to—h-m, h-m—to commit suicide?'

"'With this spoon, Mr. McPane. Sharp as a razor.'

"'Yes—h-m—yes. Wants to die. We have no such charge as—h-m, h-m—as trying suicide in this institution. Sharpened spoon—h-m, h-m—a grave offence. I'll see about that later. For breaking the rules, —h-m, h-m—by lying in bed out of hours—h-m, h-m—three days. Take him down, officer. He will—h-m, h-m—cool off.'"

After an "eternity of horror" in the dungeon the prisoner, on the doctor's orders, is restored to his cell. Thinking of his twenty-two years' sentence, he plans to dash his brains out against the bars. The old chaplain comes along, talks with Berkman and invites him to visit the prison library.

PLAN FOR ESCAPE.

"I strive to appear indifferent," continues Berkman, "while furtively following every movement of the chaplain, as he selects the rotunda key. Passionate longing for liberty is consuming me. A plan of escape is maturing in my mind. The chaplain carries all the keys. . . . I could easily overpower him. . . .

"'Have a seat, m' boy. Sit down. Here are some books. Look them over. I have a duplicate of my personal Bible, with annotations. It is somewhere here.'"

The chaplain turns his back to look for the book. Berkman reaches for the heavy bunch of keys with which he intends to crush in the chaplain's skull, and then he will make his escape.

"'My boy, I cannot find that Bible now, but I'll give you some other book. Sit down, my boy. I am so sorry about you. I am an officer of the state, but I think you were dealt with unjustly. Your sentence is quite excessive. I can well understand the state of mind that actuated you, a young enthusiast, in these exciting times. It was in connection with Homestead; is it not so, my boy?'

"I fall back into the chair, shaken, unmanned. That deep note of sympathy, the sincerity of the trembling voice—no, no, I cannot touch him. . . .

Follow days of terrible monotony and anguish in the cell house.

"I listen intently. Not a sound, save the regular swish-swash of the broom. But the more practised ear of the old prisoner did not err. A long shadow falls across the hall. The tall guard of the malicious eyes stands at my door.

"'What you pryin' out for?' he demands.

"'I am not prying.'

"'Don't you contradict me. Stand back in your hole there. Don't you be leanin' on the door; d'ye hear?'

"Down the hall the guard shouts: 'Hey, you cripple! Talkin' there, wasn't you?'

"The cripple, Old Wingie, denies it, and is heartily cursed.

"The scratching of the broom has ceased. The rangeman is dusting the doors. The even stroke of the cat-o'-nine-tails sounds nearer. Again the man stops at my door, his head turning right and left, the while he diligently plies the duster.

"'Aleck,' he whispers, 'be careful of that screw. He's a —. See him jump on me?'

"'What would he do if he saw you talking to me?'

"'Throw me in the hole, the dungeon, you know. I'd lose my job, too.'

"'Oh, I ain't scared of him. He's gone out in the yard now. He has no biz in the block (cellhouse) anyhow, 'cept at feedin' time. He's jest lookin' fer trouble. Mean skunk he is, that "Cornbread Tom."'

"'Who?'

"'That screw, Fellings. We call him "Cornbread Tom" b'cause he swipes our corn dodger.'

"'What's corn dodger?'

"'Ha, ha! Toosdays and Satoopdays we gets a chunk of cornbread for breakfast. It ain't much, but better'n stale punk. Know what punk is? Not long on lingo, are you? Punk's bread, and then some kids is punk.'"

"'Then better don't talk to me.'

Berkman is put at work in the mat shop under the tutelage of Jim, a consumptive, who asks him if he is a "fresh fish" (new prisoner) and other things. Jim explains how he got in:

"'Had a scrap wid de screws. Almost knocked me glimmer out. It was dat big bull (guard) dere, Pete Hoods. I'll get even wid him, all right, d— his rotten soul. I'll kill him. By — I will. I'll croak 'ere, anyhow.'

"'Perhaps it isn't so bad,' I try to encourage him.

"'It ain't, eh? Wat d'you know about it? I've got the con bad, spittin' blood every night. Dis dust's killin' me. Kill you, too, — quick.'

"As if to emphasize his words he is seized with a fit of coughing, prolonged and hollow. . . .

"The guard approaches. 'How's he doing?' he inquires, indicating me with a nod of the head.

"'He's all right. But say, Hoods, dis 'ere is no place for de kid. He's got a twenty-one spot (sentence).'

"'Shut your — trap,' the officer retorts angrily. The consumptive bends over his work, fearfully eyeing the keeper's measuring stick."

Jim has a hemorrhage and falls unconscious with his blood dyeing the floor. For leaving his place to report this Berkman is cursed and threatened by the guard, who then touches the face of the unconscious man with his foot to ascertain whether he is shamming. The doctor sends the consumptive to the hospital and, finding Berkman's eyes inflamed with the dust of the mat shop, orders him to report on the sick list.

After a month of imprisonment Berkman writes to The Girl, otherwise known as Sonya:

"'I keep wondering, can such a world of misery and torture be compressed into one short month? . . . Write often. Tell me about the movement, yourself and friends. It will help to keep me in touch with the outside world, which daily seems to recede further. I clutch desperately at the thread that still binds me to the living—it seems to unravel in my hands; the thin skeins are breaking, one by one. My hold is slackening. But the Sonya thread, I know, will remain taut and strong. I have always called you the Immutable. ALEX.'"

In the stocking shop there is the same speeding up of prisoner workmen as elsewhere. Johnny Davis, a mere boy, is short on his stint because some of his product is slyly stolen by a fellow prisoner. He refuses to "squeal," is sent twice to the dungeon and when his product is again being pilfered makes an attack on the thief. Johnny gets a long term in the dungeon. Berkman vainly intercedes for the unfortunate young prisoner.

"Boston Red," an educated convict, talks to Berkman:

"'I ain't no bum, see; no such — thing. Eliminate the disgraceful epithet from your vocabulary, sir, when you are addressing yours truly. I am a yagg, y-a-double g, sir, of the honorable clan of yaggmen. Some spell it y-e-double g, but I insist on the a, sir, as gramatically more correct, since the peerless word has no etymologic consanguinity with hen fruit, and should not be confounded by vulgar spelling. . . . A bum is a low down city bloke, whose intellectual horizon, sir, revolves around the back door, with a skinny hand-out as his centre of gravity. He hasn't the nerve to forsake his native heath and roam the wide world, a free and independent gentleman. That's the yagg me bye. He dares to be and do, all bulls notwithstanding. He lives, aye, he lives—on the world of suckers, thank you, sir. Of them 'tis wisely said in the Good Book, "They shall increase and multiply like the sands of the seashore," or words to that significant effect. A yagg's the salt of the earth, pard. A real, true-blood yagg will not deign to breathe the identical atmosphere with a city bum or gaycat. No, sirree.'"

The educated crook tells how he will avoid work in the shops by "putting a jigger" on himself; that is, producing an artificial sore which will incapacitate him for the heavy tasks. It is "Boston Red," too, who informs the incredulous newcomer of the prevalence of unmentionable practices among the prisoners and keepers.

A hand-written and illustrated magazine called "Prison Blossoms" is surreptitiously got out by Berkman and a group of his friends. The editors and contributors discuss the make-up through the pipes between cells, and the magazine is circulated by friendly trusties. It is written on stolen wrapping paper. Each writer adds his contribution of articles, verse or anecdote in turn as the magazine comes to him.

A newly arrived prisoner is thus described by "Boston Red":

"Like 'im, don't you? Permit me, sir, to introduce to you the handiwork of his Maker, a mealy-mouthed, oily-lipped, scurvy gay cat, a yellow cur, a snivelling, fawning stool; a filthy, oozy sneak; a snake in the grass, whose very presence, sir, is a mortal insult to a self-respecting member of my clan—Mr. Patrick Gallagher, of the honorable Pinkerton family, sir."

The warden and the deputy, McPane, make the rounds of the shop:

"Casting a glance at my assistant, the warden inquires: 'Your time must be up soon, "Red"?'

"'Been out and back again, cap'n.' The officer laughs.

"'Yes, he is—h-m, h-m—back home.' The thin feminine accents of the deputy sound sacrastic.

"'Didn't like it outside, "Red"?' the warden sneers.

"A flush darkens the face of the assistant. 'There's more skunks out than in,' he retorts."

Some one slips a knife in Berkman's pocket. It is found on him and he gets three days and nights in the dungeon on bread and water. There is no bedding in the cold, dark, underground cell. Foul odors and river rats abound. There follows a long term of solitary confinement in the "basket cell" upon a "Pennsylvania diet" of bread and black coffee, with soup twice a week. It reduces the prisoner almost to a skeleton. He is now accused of being responsible for a strike in the shops.

"Johnny" Davis, a nineteen-year-old prisoner, is in a bad stage of tuberculosis. He has been repeatedly put in the dungeon and in solitary. He is serving a five-year term for the crime of stealing $12. There are other mere boys like him, one who was sent to a reform school at nine years of age and has never been at liberty since. There was a boy in knickerbockers who was kept in the penitentiary six months. He was so small that his fellow convicts had trouble in keeping in lock step with him.

"Crazy" Smith, an insane prisoner, breaks up the furniture in his cell. The guards go after him with riot clubs and drag him, unconscious, to the dungeon. Another insane prisoner hangs himself in his cell.

There is a sick line every morning, but the doctor, taking his cue from the assistant deputy, excuses few prisoners from work. The invariable prescriptions are salts and porous plasters. A young man with parchment like face, sere and yellow, complains of pains in the stomach.

"'Give him a plaster. Next!'

"'Plaster!'—the prisoner breaks out in a fury, his face growing livid. 'Look at this, will you?' With a quick motion he pulls his shirt up to his head. His chest and back are entirely covered with porous plasters; not an inch of skin is visible. '— yer plasters,' he cries, with sudden sobs. 'I ain't got no more room for plasters. I'm putty near dyin', an' you won't do nothin' fer me.'

"The guards pounce upon the man and drag him into the rotunda.

"Jasper, the negro trusty, is a character. Deputy Warden Greaves, being partly under the influence of hip-pocket refreshment, as usual, visits the cellhouse and says:

"'Jasper, go bring me a chew.'

"'Yessah. Scrap, dep'ty?'

"'Yah. A nip of plug, too.'

"'Yessah, yessah, immejitly.'

"'What are you men doing here?' the deputy blusters at the two subordinates. . . .

"Assistant Hopkins looks sternly at the deputy warden from above his glasses. 'That's all right, Greaves,' he says familiarly, with a touch of scorn in his voice. 'Say, you should have seen that nigger Jasper swallow a great big apple in two bites; as big as your head, I'll swear.'

"Greaves wakes with a start and gazes stupidly about.

"'Say, Jasper,' Hopkins calls to the retiring negro, 'the deputy wants to hear that story you told us a while ago, about how you got the left hind foot of a she rabbit on a moonlight night in a graveyard.'

"'Who shaid I want to hear 't?' the deputy bristles, suddenly wide awake.

"'Yes, you do, Greaves,' Hopkins asserts. 'The rabbit foot brings good luck, you know. This coon here wears it on his neck. Show it to the deputy, Jasper.'

"A prisoner in Cell C18 has a hemorrhage and calls insistently for a doctor. Instead of medical attention he gets a clubbing, administered by the guards, who drag him away for further punishment.

A HUMANE GUARD.

"'Old Jimmie' Mitchell, of flowing white beard, is one of the few humane guards. He curses the convicts with picturesque force and calls them every name in the calendar, but his actions are all kindness, and the prisoners regard him as their friend. He does many things to mitigate their hard lot, while roaring and blustering at them in pretended rage.

"There is 'Crazy Hunkie,' the Austrian. Every morning, as the officer unlocks his door to hand in the loaf of bread, he makes a wild dash for the yard, shouting, 'Me wife! Where's me wife?' He rushes toward the front and desperately grabs the door handle. The double iron gate is securely locked. A look of blank amazement on his face, he slowly returns to the cell. The guards await him with malicious smiles. Suddenly they rush upon him, blackjacks in hand. . . . The blood gushing from his mouth and nose, they kick him into the cell."

A young negro named Lancaster has served his seven-year term, but is told by the warden that he must put in another half-year on account of defective work in the mat shop. He attacks a keeper, giving him "a slight scratch in the neck," is thrown in the dungeon and, emerging after ten days a drivelling imbecile, is sentenced in court to seven years' additional imprisonment for "attempted murder." He crawls about the floor of his cell on hands and knees, amid unspeakable filth, babbling stupidly: "Going, Jesus, going to Jerusalem. See, He rides the holy ass; He's going to His Father's home. Going home, going home; Jesus going to Father's home."

"Daily I behold the machinery at work, grinding and pulverizing, brutalizing the officers, dehumanizing the inmates. Far removed from the strife and struggle of the larger world, I yet witness its miniature replica, more agonizing and merciless within the walls. . . . Intrigue and counter plot, violence and corruption, are rampant in cellhouse and shop. The prisoners spy upon each other, and in turn upon the officers. The latter encourage the trusties in unearthing the secret doings of the inmates, and the stools enviously compete with each other. Often they deliberately inveigle the trustful prisoner into a fake plot to escape—and at the critical moment denounce him to the authorities. The stools and the

Continued on seventh page.

How Convicts work in Tailoring Departmer

The Gloomy Cells in which prisoners spend their Nights and Holidays

The Prisoners work as Iron Molders